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ABSTRACT

This paper describes a tool called the Professional Development Project (PDP) that helps preservice teachers become reflective teachers. Action research in a course for preservice teachers, "Reading and Literature in the Schools," from 1993 through 1996 led to the development of the PDP. Action research helps students become reflective practitioners and generators of knowledge. Data sources included the portfolios of 105 undergraduate and graduate students, student course evaluations, dialogue journals, and student instructional reports. The PDP as developed is a semester-long learning tool that incorporates a variety of assignments to help students reflect on their own literacy experiences and create their own autobiographies. As students create their own action research and conduct their own case studies, they develop as critical consumers of educational theory. The PDP is both a project and a process that illustrates that students are willing and able to use reflection as a springboard for learning. (Contains nine references.) (SLD)

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Educational Researchers, Practitioners, and Students of Teaching Reflect on Experience, Practice, and Theories: Action Research in A Preservice Course-- "Reading and Literature In the Schools"

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Educational Researchers, Practitioners, and Students of Teaching Reflect on Experience, Practice, and Theories: Action Research in A Preservice Course-- "Reading and Literature In the Schools"

Purposes

There is a plethora of educational writing maintaining that teachers who think about their beliefs and pedagogical practices make better teachers, but there is little empirical research that shows how preservice teachers develop the capacity for thinking about teaching and learning. This paper describes a tool developed by the author called the Professional Development Project (PDP) that effectively helps her students become reflective teachers.

Background

When I first started teaching at the university in 1993, my students advised me that they needed help making the shift from passive to active learning and from being students to becoming teachers. They observed that teachers need to be able to reflect on a variety of factors in order to devise a coherent curriculum and appropriate instruction. How do teachers develop the ability to reflect on experience, practice, and theories in literacy education and make wise decisions? they inquired. In response to their question, I decided to action research in that course, "Reading and Literature in the Schools."

Theoretical Framework

Today, teaching involves more than managing and organizing a classroom and teaching a sequence of lessons to a homogeneous group of learners. Teachers need to be knowledgeable, efficient, and insightful problem-solvers and decision-makers (Sternberg, 1995) and reflective practitioners (Schon, 1983, 1987). Educators work in a complex, fast moving, situation-specific environment that demands they be self-monitoring, reflective problem solvers, and critical inquirers. Teachers today have to think about what they do and about how they make decisions in a variety of everyday situations (Schon 1983, 1988). Zeichner and Tabachnick (1991) have pointed out, it really matters what teachers reflect *about*.. Zeichner and Liston (1987) suggest that we need teachers who (1) are able to identify and articulate their purposes; (2) can choose appropriate instructional strategies and develop appropriate means for instructing the students; (3) know their subjects and how to teach them; (4) can give good reasons for their decisions and their actions; (5) can do inquiry on their practice and take into account the activity of teaching, the larger community of educators, and a greater understanding of the political and social context of teaching. We maintain that the difference between good and bad practice is the number and kinds of variables taken into consideration when making a decision.

At the University of Hartford, we are infusing problem-solving and reflective practice into all aspects of our teacher education program. The following areas of professional knowledge provide the framework for reflective practice: Subject Matter, Pedagogy / Intervention, Learners are viewed as Whole Persons, Self Understanding, Human Relations, Social Contexts, Ethics, Results (See Conceptual Framework, College of Education, University of Hartford, 1995-1996 for definitions, goals and objectives.). We attempt to created policies and structures that encourage our preservice teachers to engage in active learning, higher order thinking, decision-making, and problem-solving, and reflection within the context of collegial relationships.

Methods, Modes of Inquiry

From 1993-1996, I used a participatory research design and action research methods to conduct inquiry in one of preservice teacher education course--Reading and Literature in Schools. I used a participatory research design for the study because I wanted to get a holistic and systemic perspective (Reason, 1994). Thus, I worked with experienced teachers and with my students to develop shared understandings about what it means to be a wise decision-maker and reflective practitioner. Those individuals contributed in planning, data collection, reflection, and interpretation phases of the research. The participatory research design enabled us to draw on the expertise of the entire community.

Action research helps me to create a productive work contexts with and for my students. I become more systematic in my data collection, more analytical, and more responsive to student needs when I conduct action research (Carr & Kemmis, 1986). Action research methods invite my students to join me in mediating ideas, constructing knowledge, acting upon insights, and evaluating the relationship between theory and practice. Conducting formal research while teaching, though challenging, helps me to contribute to the knowledge base of education (Cochran-Smyth & Lytle, 1993). Ideally, action research prepares students to become reflective practitioners and generators of knowledge, rather than passive participants in professional induction experiences.

Over the next two years, I met with experienced teachers in rural, suburban, and urban schools and together we identified the knowledge, thinking and problem-solving strategies, and decision-making processes which we use when making curricular and instructional decisions in reading and writing. We then reflected on the factors which influenced our decision-making. We reflected critical factors such as our own experience and assumptions or social and cultural factors in the community. We reflected on practical factors such as how we select materials and resources, plan curriculum, implement lessons and assess instruction, how we facilitate children's reading and writing development and

investigate their learning process, how we organize and manage groups, particularly given the diversity in classrooms today, and how we reflect on the results of schooling. We reflected on technical factors such as how we use textbooks, plan curriculum, teach a lesson, or administer a test. Then we developed a syllabus and a series of assignments which we believe prompted reflection. In the first year, I sat down regularly with the teachers and we reviewed the student work, identifying problems and patterns, then we made revisions in the tasks and in the syllabus.

During this same time period, I asked the students enrolled in the course to compile a portfolio in which they placed drafts and final copies of all of the assignments. Throughout the semester, the students met in small groups compared assignments and discussed the strengths and weaknesses of each other's work, and they evaluated each assignment. They began to identify patterns and qualities they liked in their work. Then, we met as a whole class and constructed a knowledge chart wherein we shared the diversity of student responses and evaluated them. In addition, every week, the students submitted dialogue journals in which they offered responses to the process and assignments. At the end of the semester, each student reflected on his or her own portfolio. Together they discussed what they learned and identified changes in their knowledge, attitudes, and assumptions about teaching reading and writing. They discussed how the portfolio process and the assignments helped them to develop as decision-makers and reflective practitioners. In those first portfolio assessments, my students said they felt that the assignments were useful, and they learned a lot. However, they wanted to see how all of the assignments fit together into a coherent whole. I noted that many students did not draw on prior and knowledge, respond personally or critically to the readings, or see the relationships between their own experiences, course work and field work. In response to that situation, I developed the Professional Development Project (PDP).

Data sources or evidence

1993-1994

105 student portfolios (undergraduates--45 fall and 30 spring, graduate students 30 summer)

105 completed portfolio assessment forms

105 qualitative course evaluations and 75 Student Instructional Reports

1994-1995

90 student dialogue journals

90 student portfolios

90 portfolio assessment forms

90 qualitative course evaluations and 90 Student Instructional Reports

1995-1996

80 Professional Development Projects (PDP)

80 portfolio assessment forms

80 qualitative course evaluations and Student Instructional Reports

I analyzed the work in two students' PDPs and use examples from them to illustrate how the tool works.

Description of the Tool

The PDP is a semester-long learning tool that incorporates a variety of assignments designed to help students develop their capacity as wise decision makers and reflective practitioners in three ways. First, as students reflect on their own literacy experiences and they create their autobiographies as readers and writers, they are encouraged to value themselves as distinctive, intuitive, and whole human beings. Second, as students share responses to focus questions in small groups, they learn the language, concepts, and modes of inquiry in the field. Third, students form a critical learning community. The students discuss issues in small groups, and then, as a whole class evaluate the diverse interpretations, they become conscious of their diverse experiences, values, ways of knowing. When they conduct their own action research, students develop as critical consumers of theory, interactive learners, and as responsible members of a learning community.

Professional Development Project

1. An autobiography
2. A reader's log, which includes responses to five children's books
3. An arts extension project for one piece of literature
4. An original piece of writing and a writer's log
5. A case study based on an observation of a reader and writer
6. A case study analysis based on a classroom observation
7. An issue paper based on a problem or question related to literacy instruction
8. A presentation and/or interactive discussion of an issue in literacy education
9. A performance assessment-- a letter of application for a job
10. Portfolio assessment

What did you learn from each of the assignments?

Rate assignments in terms of your own personal satisfaction. Explain your criteria for judging the assignment as more or less satisfying.

Reflect on the value of each assignment to your overall development as a teacher? Explain why an assignment is or is not valuable to you.

What are your next steps as a learner?

What grade did you earn? Why?

Results/ Conclusion/ Point of View

The Professional Development Project is both a project and a process which helps students to become reflective in three ways. First, it invites them to bring their experiences, knowledge, and observations into the classroom and to interrogate them. Second, it leads them to develop learning, critical thinking, and knowledge-construction strategies. Third, it encourages them to reflect on the interaction between their personal lives and their experiences in schools and communities and the premises underlying theories and practices in literacy education.

In the Professional Development Project I have seen more engaged, self-aware, strategic thinking than ever before. It seems evident that learning and social structures that nurture personal agency and group accountability promote reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. In reflecting on the way the tool works in practice, I found that the autobiographical nature of PDP assignments invites students to become systematic observers of their own subjectivity. Second, the assignments help students see that knowledge about literacy is mediated by a host of factors related to an individual's history. The PDP helps students realize the "situatedness" of their knowledge about literacy.

Critical reflection on experience helps the students realize that their knowledge and all cognition are theory-laden and mediated through human practice. The PDP assignments and the process make students examine the specific processes by which knowledge is constructed. Students investigate the adequacy of evidence, criteria for relevance, modes of analysis, and strategies for making arguments by proponents of various approaches to teaching of reading and writing. The PDP encourages students to form an inquiry community. As students investigate and discuss the concerns that come out of their experience and their reading, they realize the rich and varied traditions. Rather than privileging one instructional approach over another, they learn to investigate the historical and social conditions that define each. They discover the tacit theoretical assumptions that form the underpinnings of theories and practices in literacy education.

Educational importance of the study

We often read that preservice teacher education students are interested in acquiring technical and practical skills. They are less interested in discussing critical issues. I do see some students like that, but I see a lot more students like Rich and Mark-- students who have stories, who have experiences, who have questions and who know a great deal about literacy education. The examples of student work demonstrate that teacher education students are willing and able to use reflection on their own experiences, knowledge, and beliefs as a springboard for learning, and to critically evaluate texts and social contexts if the course structure requires it. The Professional Development Project helps me and my students to gain insight into their theories and beliefs about teaching reading. Through inquiry and analysis of texts, field work reports, and "kidwatching" assessments, these preservice teachers became more aware of the relationship between theory and practice. Through action research and library research, these students became more conscious of the conditions which maintain or transform the status quo in schools.

The students respond favorably to the approach that I am using in this course. In the fall of 1995, on the Student Instructional Report, an ETS (Educational Testing Service) Higher Education Assessment, 70% of the students in the course rated the instruction as excellent and 20% rated it as very good, 5% rated it as satisfactory, and 5% omitted the item. 90% of the students rated the class planning as excellent, 90% rated the faculty-student interaction as high, and 90% noted that I encouraged them to think for themselves, and 90% rated the textbook and readings as excellent and the exams and projects as fair. As I survey these results, I am reminded that learning involves struggle, teaching well involves research, and on-going dialogue leads to reflection.

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